

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Christos Tsiolkas, *Merciless Gods* (Allen & Unwin, 2014)

I've been addicted to Christos Tsiolkas for years because his novels make me uncomfortable. They confront me with racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, pornography, drug use and hard-core sex, and it's relentless. In each and every one of his books he paints these same issues with bold strokes in dark hues, and I've never cared that he's predictable (which seems such a petty word for a writer of his power). Again and again he asks his readers to contemplate what it means to be Australian, what it means to be a migrant Australian, what it means to be a migrant man living in Australia, what it means to be a migrant gay man living in Australia, and I'm always newly exhilarated returning to those questions because Tsiolkas does tension well. He writes characters who are fuelled by anger, who do shocking things, whom we somehow recognise in our own selves.

But I began to panic after reading the opening three stories in his collection *Merciless Gods*: what if I didn't like this book because it was not a single work, pushing me onto a single resolution? What if the fact that it was fifteen single works pushing me onto the same resolution fifteen times made me deem the book 'predictable' in a way I cannot parenthetically rationalise? Would I still be able to retain my literary love affair with Tsiolkas? Would I have to somehow deny him? I didn't know if I was ready for that. Thankfully, I needn't have worried. I read *Merciless Gods* in full and I'm still an addict.

Still, there are some stories that feel very *same*, but the stories he credits as published elsewhere date back to 1995 (in Picador's *New Writing 3* series) while the latest is from 2014 (*Overland*). That's a nine-year-gap in publications, and possibly a bigger gap between when the first and last story were actually written, so it's likely Tsiolkas had time to recover from each story, had time to write each story tackling the same themes as those that came before it with fresh eyes, just as he does with his novels. The question begs to be asked: do we? How many characters have to enjoy an end-of-the-night joint before we decide it might as well be the same character?

But experimentation does play a part in this collection and certain stories feel decidedly different from others. 'Petals', for instance, was originally written in Greek by the author then translated into English by the author, and the stiltedness of the protagonist's broken English becomes the star of the story. His labour with the language, and the reactions to it from his inmates and the prison guards, position him in a sympathetic light, even though he is a murderer. But Tsiolkas might well be saying that no one is fully bad. People have stories which make them complex and sympathy is perhaps one layer from the surface. In the title story, even the very young are not immune to the notion of revenge, shaping their later lives.

In 'Jessica Lange in *Frances*' there is a graphic sex scene, and if you are at all familiar with Tsiolkas's work that would not come as any big surprise, but this scene is literally turned into a kind of poetry, as Tsiolkas adds in line breaks, creating a breathlessness of the moment:

...I stroked his hair, his face, and  
 we were kissing and  
 his mouth was harsh, not a girl's mouth, and his body was hard as it pressed against  
 me, covering me, but the skin was just so soft, like touching the underneath of bark  
 and I thought a few times, as we were making love, that  
 fuck, it's a man, this is a man  
 but our bodies worked together, and I liked him coming all over me, groaning and swearing  
 loudly,

Book reviews: *Merciless Gods* by Christos Tsiolkas. Heather Taylor Johnson.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 7 no. 2, May 2015.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

repeating  
oh man oh man oh man  
and as I was coming I had my eyes closed but I was digging my mouth into his neck and  
I had to stop myself screaming, so I bit into him, because what I wanted to scream  
was something about love.

Just as the structure of this sex scene is untraditional, so too is the overall structure of the story. Tsiolkas unsettles us in our reading, going back and forth from past to present, so that the affair between the protagonist and his abusive lover is not as straightforward as it might otherwise be. It is crooked, messed up, episodic and causal.

'Civil War', too, has a poetic flare in the telling. The protagonist is detoxing, trying to find God without the drugs, and he finds it in the Nullarbor after escaping a casual lover who has overdosed. The experience of discovering spirituality for the first time is much like the experience of drugs, though there is blackfella holiness in his vision, fitting the story's theme. The casual lover was Aboriginal; the trucker who picked him up raves about killing all the boongs before they kill us. The protagonist in this story separates himself from the us/them dichotomy and tries to find a middle ground: the Nullarbor. I never thought of Tsiolkas as a nature writer because his work is so often rooted in the streets of cities, the toilet blocks and backyard barbecues, so this is something new. If I could pick one story to read from this book, and only one story, it would be this.

'The Disco at the End of Communism' and 'Sticks, Stones' would be difficult stories to pass by, though, because they work with another of Tsiolkas's reliable themes: family. No, we can't choose our family, and no, even when we try, we cannot live without them. By delving into these 'unconditional love-based' relationships and boldly showing that there can be real, deep-seated anger, even a complicated form of hatred at the core of them, Tsiolkas shows that no relationship is immune to scrutiny.

As much as the stories in *Merciless Gods* are disconcerting and as much as they give us a frightening view of humanity and the self, there is a certain amount of redemption that ultimately shines through. Tsiolkas' ability to balance the two is what makes change in our world feel possible. But it is his ability to skew the balance toward 'disconcerting' and 'frightening' that makes him so addictive.

**Heather Taylor Johnson**